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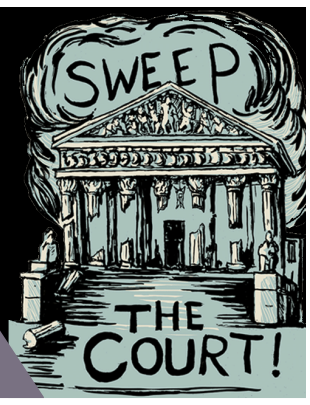
APRIL 22, 2024

SWEEP THE SUPREME COURT
DAY OF ACTION

On April 22, 2024 the US Supreme Court will decide if a Grants Pass, Oregon law banning camping is "cruel and unusual", violating the 8th Amendment. Join our day of action in 14 cities across the US to let the court know that sleeping is a human right!



What Is Grants Pass Outlawing, and Why Does it Matter?

The City of Grants Pass defines camping as sleeping with a blanket or other covering. If the court sides with Grants Pass, it will give US cities the green light to further criminalize basic survival activities: sleeping, sitting, standing, eating, and more.

Cities use "sweeps" to enforce anti-homeless laws. Making people move over and over causing immense harm to our communities, including:

- Fines, citations, arrests, harassment, and forced displacement.
- Shortened life expectancy, and death.
- Loss of essential belongings, including survival gear, ID, medicines, treasured possessions.
- Significant physical and emotional trauma.

Sweeps are part of a cycle that deepens poverty and trauma, and impacts are magnified for Black and Brown people, LGBTQ+ folks, immigrants, and Disabled people. Criminal records acquired while surviving unhoused prevent access to the minimal economic and housing support programs available – prolonging homelessness. Sweeps and related citations, fines, and arrests, in other words, are massive barriers to moving out of homelessness.

We are Fighting Back!!!!!

On April 2, WRAP members filed an "amicus brief" with the Supreme Court – a "friends of the court" petition – arguing that the court should NOT allow any city to ban camping and other activities necessary for survival. Our brief highlights firsthand accounts of what it's like to be swept and criminalized. **We are out in the streets today to amplify the voices of our communities, and will continue to organize until housing is a human and civil right!**

Where Does the Grants Pass Law Come From?

Thousands of laws like the one in Grants Pass exist in cities across the US. Today's laws have evolved from historical laws banishing particular people from public space.

For decades, Grants Pass was a "Sundown Town," a town that prohibited the presence of non-white people after dark. In fact, Grants Pass leaders explicitly targeted the act of sleeping while terrorizing Black, Brown, and Indigenous people in editorials like this one:

Let's Keep Grants Pass A White Man's Town

Grants Pass always has been a white man's town, and there is no reason under the shining sun why it shouldn't continue to be a white man's town. The fact that this is a white man's country here in this wonderful Rogue River Valley, has brought the best of the white race here and such population will bring the cream of the white race here in the future.

The attitude o fthe people of this peaceful, law abiding community toward the encroachments of the black, brown or red races of the land, or the world for that matter, is NI t WE DON'T WANT YOU HERE—AND WE WON'T HAVE YOU HERE —YOU HAD BETTER ROLL UP YOUR BED AND RIDE—THIS IS TO BE A WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY, YESTERDAY, TODAY AND FOREVER.

Today's anti-camping ordinances hardly differ from those of the past. Transphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, ableism, and especially Anti-Black racism continue to be enacted through anti-homeless laws that criminalize basic survival.

Homelessness is a Systemic Problem

Homelessness is not a choice. It is a status resulting from years of policy decisions prioritizing profits over people. Since 1994, for example, the US government has gotten rid of 487,000 units of public housing. **Rather than eradicating *homelessness*, governments try to eradicate *unhoused people*.** Criminalizing homelessness fails to address systemic causes of mass homelessness, exacerbates underlying structures of oppression, and drains communities of capacity to build toward better futures.

Our Demands

1. End the practice of sweeping encampments: towing houseless people's vehicles, stealing their belongings, and destroying the structures they create to keep themselves and their communities safe from the elements!
2. End the criminalization of houseless people, by ending the practices of move-along orders, harassment, ticketing and arresting houseless people for existing outside!
3. Create and fund actual public health interventions, including harm reduction, sanitation, and others that appropriately respond to the needs of poor and houseless people!
4. Provide adequate funding for the development and maintenance of housing units and the preservation of existing housing for poor and houseless people!
5. End the practice of banishment policies from yesterday's Sundown Towns to today's Sweeps!

For more information visit
wraphome.org/targeted-banished-displace-swept/
Email: wrap@wraphome.org

CONTRIBUTE TO STREET SHEET

WRITING: Write about your experience of homelessness in San Francisco, about policies you think the City should put in place or change, your opinion on local issues, or about something newsworthy happening in your neighborhood!

ARTWORK: Help transform ART into ACTION by designing artwork for STREET SHEET! We especially love art that uplifts homeless people, celebrates the power of community organizing, or calls out abuses of power!

VISIT WWW.STREETSHEET.ORG/SUBMIT-YOUR-WRITING/ OR BRING SUBMISSIONS TO 280 TURK STREET

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COALITION ON HOMELESSNESS

The STREET SHEET is a project of the Coalition on Homelessness. The Coalition on Homelessness organizes poor and homeless people to create permanent solutions to poverty while protecting the civil and human rights of those forced to remain on the streets.

Our organizing is based on extensive peer outreach, and the information gathered directly drives the Coalition's work. We do not bring our agenda to poor and homeless people: they bring their agendas to us.

STREET SHEET STAFF

The Street Sheet is a publication of the Coalition on Homelessness. Some stories are collectively written, and some stories have individual authors. But whoever sets fingers to keyboard, all stories are formed by the collective work of dozens of volunteers, and our outreach to hundreds of homeless people.

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Street Sheet is published and distributed on the unceded ancestral homeland of the Ramaytush Ohlone peoples. We recognize and honor the ongoing presence and stewardship of the original people of this land. We recognize that homelessness can not truly be ended until this land is returned to its original stewards.

ORGANIZE WITH US

HOUSING JUSTICE WORKING GROUP
TUESDAYS @ NOON
The Housing Justice Workgroup is working toward a San Francisco in which every human being can have and maintain decent, habitable, safe, and secure housing. This meeting is in English and Spanish and open to everyone! Email mcarrera@cohsf.org to get involved!

HUMAN RIGHTS WORKING GROUP
WEDNESDAYS @12:30
The Human Rights Workgroup has been doing some serious heavy lifting on these issues: conducting direct research, outreach to people on the streets, running multiple campaigns, developing policy, staging direct actions, capturing media attention, and so much more. All those down for the cause are welcome to join! Email lpierce@cohsf.org

EVERYONE IS INVITED TO JOIN OUR WORKING GROUP MEETINGS!

THE SF CIVICS LESSON YOU NEVER KNEW YOU NEEDED

JORDAN DAVIS

I recently hate-watched "Why San Francisco Is Broken And How To Fix It," the cringe Jeopardy-style game show. It was produced by Together SF Action, a right-wing group that wants to give the mayor even more power than she has right now, and wants the city to work only for the well-heeled and privileged. It was extremely difficult to sit through all the misinformation about our governmental structure, but one category concerning "countless commissions" got my blood boiling. The clue was, "This notable city department is overseen by four separate commissions/committees." The response was, "What is the Department of Homelessness?" Of all the errors throughout the program, not referring to the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing (HSH) by its entire name was especially laughable.

The show claimed that four separate bodies oversee the department: the Shelter Grievance Advisory Committee, the Our CIty Our Home Oversight Committee, the Local Homeless Coordinating Board and the Homelessness Oversight Commission. Only the last one actually oversees HSH.

The show also claimed that there are 130 boards and commissions making big decisions about the city without accountability to voters, like some appointed shadow government that can counter the Board of Supervisors and the mayor, and cited Together SF Action's efforts to place a ballot measure reducing the number of commissions to 65.

In fact, commissions—especially oversight and advisory commissions—play a vital role in increasing transparency, bringing equity and fostering civic engagement in this city. I speak as a person who has served on an advisory commission, passed recommendations at the advisory body that became ordinances, and saw the problems of the commission and called for its disbandment.

In San Francisco, we elect 11 supervisors as a legislative branch, and a mayor as an executive branch. While the supervisors and mayor deal with municipal affairs and have plenty of aides to deal with the various issues facing the city, they can only do so much, so we have commissions to zoom in on a specific department or issue that may be important but not ready for prime time. However, one important fact is that commissions cannot veto legislation or mayoral directives.

I know that many of these appointed bodies use various names like "commission," "board," "committee" or "task force," but I will use the term "commission" as a catch-all. I will also focus on two main types of commissions: oversight and advisory.

The oversight commission is the "power commission," which is distinct from the others in that it has some power over a department or may be an adjudicative body that makes decisions on one's legal interests, and requires its members to file a statement of economic interest called a Form 700 to avoid conflicts of interest. The sole commission of this type related to homelessness is the Homelessness Oversight Commission—its powers include, but are not limited to, approving budgets, formulating annual long term goals, establishing performance standards and conducting performance audits of service delivery. Oversight commissions in other departments have similar mandates, and may include policy setting and advisement on legislation. However, if a commission has policy-making power, it may never countermand existing federal, state or local laws, nor veto legislation passed by the Board of Supervisors. If somebody is dissatisfied with decisions made at any commission, they may always lobby the supervisors to pass a law.

On the other hand, the advisory commission has no power at all, except recommending personnel to their appointing bodies, who in turn have final say on whether these recommendations move forward. There are four bodies dealing with HSH issues: the Local Homeless Coordinating Board, which deals with matters that are federally mandated or funded; the Our City Our Home Oversight Commission, which provides recommendations on spending tax revenues from the homelessness gross receipts tax, passed as Proposition C in November 2018; and the Shelter Monitoring Committee and Shelter Grievance Advisory Committee, both of which make recommendations on various issues within the shelter system. As I have covered in a previous article, there is no advisory commission that deals with permanent supportive housing, and which is sorely needed.

I served on the city's SRO Task Force, which was an advisory commission dealing with issues around single-resident occupancy hotels, both private and nonprofit. I successfully introduced and passed two recommendations: one around gender neutral common bathrooms at SROs, and the other calling for PSH tenants to pay only 30% of their income towards rent. Both became city ordinances. However, the commission had many efficacy issues that I had addressed in a previous article, and I called for its disbandment. The commission sunsetted at the end of 2021, after two years of dormancy.

It should be noted that the Board of Supervisors creates many advisory commissions, and that according to Section 2.21 of the board's Rules of Order, all advisory bodies must sunset within three years unless renewed. But, renewal of advisory commissions has become a mere formality rather than an opportunity to provide meaningful oversight and to judge whether or not the commission is truly providing recommendations and addressing emerging issues within its subject matter jurisdiction.

Both oversight commissions and advisory commissions are bound by the state Brown Act and the City's Sunshine Ordinance, which require that meetings be open to the public and that public comment be taken. It is important that there be ways to take a deeper dive into policy areas, and that civic engagement be enhanced.

So, what do we do? I believe that, except for those with adjudicative commissions, each department should have only one oversight commission, and that advisory commissions should be required to submit annual reports detailing recommendations considered and passed, and that the Board of Supervisors should create a culture of scrutiny for these advisory bodies. These are not just "moderate" or "progressive" issues—it's a good government issue and it's a civic engagement issue. ■

Jordan Davis (she/they) is a permanent supportive housing tenant advocate who fought successfully to get rents down to 30% of income, and continues to fight for our rights. She can be reached at 30rightnow@gmail.com

STATE SENATE SIT-LIE BAN FAILS IN COMMITTEE

LUKAS ILLA

With the room packed and members of the public spilling out to the hallway, the California Senate Committee on Public Safety rejected Senate Bill 1011, a bill that sought to criminalize homeless encampments within 500 feet of a public or private K-12 school, major transit stops and "open spaces."

The committee voted 3-1 against SB 1011, with another one abstaining. The vote prevented the bill from moving to the full Senate. This was the second failed attempt at a statewide sit-lie ban in two years.

While the committee granted the bill reconsideration, a classification where it can still be brought to the Senate for a full vote, its future seems highly unlikely, given the committee's rejection and lack of support from majority members.

The two senators co-authored the bill, Brian Jones (R-Santee) and Catherine Blakespear (D-Encinitas), argued that it does not aim to criminalize homelessness but is instead only a part of the toolbox necessary to solve homelessness.

"We all deserve to have clean spaces in public that are safe and inviting," Blakespear said. "We also deserve to have open spaces that protect nature and do not create a flow of human and animal waste and trash and debris into our waterways."

Still, the bill met with opposition from homeless advocates. Dez Martinez, a pillar in the Fresno homeless advocacy community who opposed SB 1011, spoke of the violence that the city imposes upon unhoused people during sweeps.

"I have witnessed and endured brutal punishments on us, especially the ones that suffer with physical disabilities," she said. "Punished because we don't move fast enough, so everything is taken: blankets, food, clothing, medicine, IDs, tents, tarps, and even our dog food—anything that would help us survive to the next day."

The American Civil Liberties Union California Action and a litany of homeless advocacy groups brought dozens of community members, such as Martinez, to voice opposition to the bill.

The public safety committee's chair, Aisha Wahab (D-Fremont), and committee member Nancy Skinner (D-Oakland) both spoke to the limited protections local and state governments offer people experiencing poverty. Skinner said that the bill was redundant because local municipalities already have the ability to institute similar ordinances.

Joining Wahab and Skinner in voting against the bill was Scott Wiener (D-San Francisco), who was absent during the bill's discussion in committee. Kelly Seyarto (R-Murrieta) was the lone yes vote. Sen. Steven Bradford (D-Gardena) voted present.

Last session, a similar bill, SB 31, had been introduced as an exclusively Republican-supported bill. This year, SB 1011 was a bipartisan effort with three Democrat co-sponsors: Blakespear, Bill Dodd (D-Napa) and Marie Alvarado-Gil (D-Modesto). With its success in securing bipartisan support on its second time around, SB 1011 appears primed to be re-introduced next session, too.

"SB 1011 will ultimately destroy many lives by pushing people further away from services," Martinez told the committee. "We are dying, trying to survive. Please be our hope." ■

SCOTUS WILL DECIDE IF HOME

The following transcript is an interview with Jennifer Friedenbach, executive dire
Civil Liberties Union. The episode dropped on April 18, before the U.S. Supreme
brevity, clar

KENDALL CIESEMIER: On April 22, the Supreme Court will hear the case of Grants Pass v. Johnson. This will be the most significant court case about the rights of homeless people in decades. At its core, Grants Pass will decide whether cities are allowed to punish people for things like sleeping outside with a pillow or blanket, even when there are no safe shelter options, posing potentially great risk to the 250,000 Americans who sleep outside on any given night.

This case comes at a time when the affordable housing market is strapped, with a deficit of 6.8 million affordable housing units needed nationwide for extremely low-income families. What's more, according to a recent Harvard study, 1 in 4 renters, or 11.2 million households, are severely burdened by rents that take up over half of their incomes.

These millions of renters living paycheck to paycheck are at significant risk of losing their home at the turn of a rainy day, with Americans of color, disabled Americans, and queer and trans Americans at even greater risk.

With so many folks on a razor-thin edge of experiencing housing instability, all eyes are on Grant's pass. Joining us to talk a little bit more about the case and the broader systemic issue of housing instability, homelessness, and what it would take to make a meaningful dent in both is Jennifer Friedenbach, the Executive Director of the Coalition on Homelessness in San Francisco. Jennifer, welcome to "At Liberty," and thank you so much for joining me.

I want to start with the case at hand, which is Grants Pass v. Johnson. It's going to be argued next week. We'll get a decision later this year in June.

When you heard the case was headed to the Supreme Court, what were your first thoughts?

JENNIFER: Yeah, I was surprised and then I was really worried because the Supreme Court didn't take this up the first time, but it's really such a political court and since Fox News has been kind of using homelessness as a way to try to shame Democratic strongholds in major cities that it has become so political.

And so I think that's probably why they took it up.

KENDALL: That makes sense. Usually they like to take up things that are kind of going on in the public discourse. A discussion in this case is whether or not people can sleep outside without punishment. Punishment being arrest or criminal charge.

What does that look like as it exists today? What are city governments like currently allowed to do?

JENNIFER: First of all, not all city governments are following the law as it is, which is why there's so many lawsuits on this. They can still do operations in terms of removing encampments for health code violations, if someone's blocking a sidewalk, I mean, all these different kinds of things.

Really, it's a very narrow right, but a really important right, and that is that they can't cite or arrest people for lodging or, like, sleeping on the sidewalk if they haven't offered shelter first. And so that really kind of creates pressure on these municipalities to address the issue instead of just kind of pushing people around and violating their rights.

So, they're also not supposed to be taking people's property and throwing it away. And so there's protections that people enjoy that are, at a point in their lives where they're really experiencing, a devastating situation where they have lost their housing, and then to have the city governments kind of then stomp all over them.

It feels like for homeless people to be kicked when you're down, frankly. And so this, these little rights at least create a little bit of protection for them against these actions.

KENDALL: Kicking you when you're down is such a good way of putting it and we see this across so many disciplines of American public policy or so many different areas that we work on at the ACLU. But I want to dig in a little bit to encampments because I think encampments have, with the pandemic and subsequent amplification of our housing crisis, grown to exist in many American cities beyond kind of historically where they existed in the American West so to speak. And as you mentioned, they've become this sort of political hot potato.

People are talking about encampments and city officials are facing a lot of public pressure to increasingly break up encampments. What do you make of the public pressure? Why is this happening now? What do you want people to know about the kind of pressure that they're putting on city officials?

JENNIFER: Yeah. I mean, folks are really frustrated, right? I mean, they're frustrated. There's a group of people who are completely destitute that don't have access to sanitation, hygiene, bathrooms, water and folks are frustrated. Nobody's as frustrated, of course, as homeless people themselves who are experiencing this humanitarian crisis that is hurting them and taking years off their lives.

And so, but if people don't have anywhere to go, it doesn't solve the problem. And so a lot of times we have a situation with rising rents and this huge disparity between income and the cost of housing across the country, but really significant on the West, up and down the West Coast. And so when the governments come in and they say, okay, we're just going to move people, it hurts everybody because you're basically wasting resources that could be better spent on solutions.

It also erodes trust in city government because you don't have a real response. You have this kind of performative fake kind of use of force but what it does do, what we, we do know it does is, is that it lengthens homelessness because when they take people's property they lose their paperwork.

They lose contact with social workers that are connecting them with social workers. People get fines and fees that they can't pay. Court dates that they miss because they don't have an address to receive the notifications. They get warrants out for their arrests, [it] creates this paupers' prison in San Francisco, 40 percent of our jail population is unhoused.

And then when people have warrants, they get kicked off of public housing wait lists. I mean, it's really something that creates this problem and it erodes trust with unhoused people who oftentimes are coming out of foster care and other institutions where they already have a mistrust.

So it really hurts everyone.

KENDALL: I mean, as you kind of described encampments, breaking up encampments is happening very commonly by city officials, but it's not actually solving the problem. We like in America to put band-aids on issues instead of going to the root cause and trying to really do the hard work to fix the problem.

What do you think is undergirding this lack of a meaningful solution? Is it a lack of political will or is it something else?

JENNIFER: It's absolutely a lack of political will and I think that derives from who is out there on the streets. I mean, it's incredibly destitute people who are a class of people that are still OK to hate.

It's very common for tropes to be put out there about this community that are fundamentally untrue. And they really kind of other people by saying that they're unhoused people in their city. Every city in the United States does it. Their homeless population came from elsewhere, when in fact, the majority of people became homeless as housed people in that particular city.

And then you have tropes around substance use and people being addicts, when in fact homelessness rarely is caused by addiction. Yet homelessness, once people are homeless for a long period of time, does increase rates of addiction because of the traumas associated with homelessness. And this whole idea that people are refusing services, when nowhere in the United States do we have a system of care that is ready for this crisis, and able to address these really deep socioeconomic disparities.

We have some huge inequities in the United States and homelessness is the visual representation of that. And for me, that's really what brings me to the work is that you see this overrepresentation of oppressed communities. You see an overrepresentation of African Americans. Overrepresentation of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Overrepresentation of people with disabilities.

And it's not just a little bit over. I mean, in San Francisco, African Americans are five times more likely to experience homelessness. It's very dramatic. Members of the queer community, two times as likely. So it's, it really is where these intersections of oppression exist.

KENDALL: Thank you for laying that out there.

I think that some folks might be listening and think, wow, this is unusual for the ACLU to be involved in this issue, to be talking about homelessness as a social problem. But I think the intersectionality that you just described is exactly why we are involved. It is something that disproportionately is impacting communities that we fight for their rights.

So whether that's women, people of color, you named a plethora of folks. I also think that what you said about it being a visual representation of those kinds of societal problems that still exist, the hate that still exists. You also listed a number of stigmas and misconceptions about the population of people who experience homelessness.

Why do you think we still have su lessness? And really, what do we away at the stigma?

JENNIFER: I think part of it is kin what we—we've managed to do is ism, disablism, for the most part,

I mean, it's not that it doesn't exis

KENDALL: There's a social paria those things, people are going to

JENNIFER: Right. And so on this munity members really cloaks tha bia, ageism, ableism.

So it creates a scapegoat for polic And then those misconceptions e mindset. And when you have also public trust in a solution, people's and higher. And they get to this p to be done.

"I'm just OK with anything. Just g that's a huge piece of it. It's pretty scientific studies on what kind of people and homelessness is, it cre

How we overcome it, I think, is th other issues is that we really hum that the voices of folks who are pe ness are elevated and are centered need to be consistent in that and Coalition on Homelessness does lo

KENDALL: I want to focus on Sa start with the case at hand becau cides or is addressing something of Northern California and the C part of. The Coalition on Homele against the city of San Francisco.

What can you tell me about that Pass case, and why you all filed t Northern California?

JENNIFER: Yeah, definitely. So fo to work with the city to establish a humane and effective— that act humane—to getting people off th response.

We got some pretty decent policie and tagging, in a process for if yo ple's property because they're not leave a notice, and they have a ce come and pick it up, that we have services and trying to get people into shelter housing, et cetera. Ho following those policies. And we b this evidence. I mean a mountain

We found that over 3,000 cases of ing people without offering shelte of property destruction. And wha filed, because the city was not abl rect and challenge any of that evi true, a judge ended up issuing an city that basically said that the ci

So one of the things that we foun the city designed forms to evade having enough shelter beds by ha of either homeless people accepte shelter, and that's what they click every encampment, when we gath would say an encampment of 10 p three shelter beds to offer.

And then we had public officials c that, that that was a lie, etc. And these things. Not only are people are just kind of moved, and trust an operation not too long ago whe American man who was there, wh

He really wanted to get off the str needed to get off the streets. The of force. They offered him an upp Of course, he couldn't use that. A

ELESSNESS CAN BE PUNISHED

ector of the Coalition on Homelessness, on At Liberty, the podcast of the American e Court started hearing the case of Grants Pass v. Johnson.. It has been edited for rity and style.

uch a stigma attached to home- do about it? How do we chip

d of a political construct. I mean, make racism, homophobia, age- kind of unacceptable, right?

st anymore, but there is—

h factor to it. If you're overtly make note.

issue, disdain for unhoused com- at underlying racism, homopho-

ymakers that can go unchecked. nd up kind of permeating the a response that really erodes s level of frustration gets higher oint where there's nothing going

get them out of here." I think deep at this point. They do has an emotional reaction for ates a disgust in folks.

e same way we overcome these anize the issue and make sure ersonally impacted by homeless- d in our discussion. We really that's a big part of what the ocally.

n Francisco for a second. So I'll se the Grants Pass case coin- that another case that the ACLU oalition on Homelessness are a ssness is a plaintiff in a lawsuit

case, how it relates to the Grants his lawsuit with the ACLU of

r years, we were trying policies so that we have ually leads, which is also e streets, on their street

es in place around bagging u're taking homeless peo- t there, you bag and tag it, rtain amount of time to a process for leading with into, off the streets and owever, the city was not basically had collected all of evidence, honestly.

f the city citing or arrest- er first, massive amounts t happened was, once we e to come back and cor- dence, because it was all injunction against the ty had to follow the law.

d in this process is that responsibility for not ving this binary choice d shelter or they refused ed on their forms. But at ered the evidence, they people and they only had

oming forward and saying so they were forced to do not off the streets that is disintegrated. I was at ere there was an African o was in a wheelchair.

eets. He was elderly. He y swoop in with this use er bunk and a shelter. nd then they disappear.

Then that guy is left out on the streets. So, the neighbors who are complaining about that guy being there, don't have their issues resolved.

He doesn't have his issues resolved. And we just spent a ton of money on something that got us nowhere.

KENDALL: It seems like a lot of government inefficiency, which I think pretty much everyone can kind of buy into "how do we make the government more efficient?" How do you make local government, state government work for you on these kinds of issues?so this case is going on at the same time as the Grants Pass case.

The city has actually used the Grants Pass case to try to block the lawsuit. What is the interconnectedness between this national case, Grants Pass, the decision that we'll hear in June, and how it will impact the case with the city of San Francisco?

JENNIFER: In our lawsuit, we [actually] have 13 different claims, but this particular one around cruel and unusual punishment is one of them.

This idea that if folks have no other choice but to be homeless, then the municipality shouldn't be able to cite and arrest them., That is one of our claims that the city is violating, and that is what's up in front of the Supreme Court. And so if they decide to overturn it, what it means is that—basically the municipalities are free to cite and arrest people who have no other choice but to be on the streets.

Yeah, and that doesn't totally kill our lawsuit, but obviously has an impact on one of our claims. And I feel like this particular right creates a pressure on the city, this idea that they have to provide at least some modicum of services for folks, that if it disappears is really a problem.

Of course the whole idea of cruel and unusual—who knows what the Supreme Court will do—but there's a lot at stake for everybody who's kind of protected around cruel and unusual punishment for not being punished for who they are. And so it's like many of these things.

It really has a broad effect on everyone's civil rights.

KENDALL: And conversely, if the Supreme Court were to decide it is cruel and unusual punishment to punish folks who are sleeping outside because they have no other place to go, that I imagine would strengthen the case that you all have existing against the city of San Francisco.

Is that correct?

JENNIFER: Yeah, absolutely. This for us is almost like a crowbar. Lawsuits take a lot of time, but what it does is oftentimes is that it forces the city to address things that they're unwilling to address. Our vision for this lawsuit is not just about these particular rights, but it's about getting the city to do the things that they need to do to holistically address the problem.

So, starting with an effective street response that's based on national standards that were established during the Obama administration who recognized that criminalization is counterproductive. And so, we have done it right in San Francisco. We have this one model we refer to as the King Street model.

It was a large encampment of folks that had some pretty severe acuities and barriers and by working together with them and the city and with us and different folks, they were able to have their voice at the table around what was going to address their needs.

KENDALL: I want to pick up on one thread that I think we've been alluding to a lot in this conversation, and we've even addressed like the potential impacts of criminalizing homelessness. But the idea of criminalization opening up this kind of broader authority for a police force to potentially even enact brutality, I think that we've seen a lot.

In the past number of years, police brutality has become a very notable and seen and spoken about issue, which is great. How does the increase of criminalization of homeless folks interplay with police authority or the ability for police to use force that would then yield really dire circumstances or impacts?

JENNIFER: Yeah, the big picture is that this mass episode of homelessness is our second big mass homelessness in the United States since the Great Depression. And it's extended for decades because we didn't do the things that needed to be done. In fact, we went in the opposite direction and cut our housing by 76 percent at the federal level.

Then this huge humanitarian crisis is kind of laid at the feet of the municipal government, [which] has then used police as a primary response to homelessness. So, if there's an unhoused person out

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PHOTO BY ALASTAIR BOONE

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in front of my home, whether I'm concerned about them and want to get them help, or I want them gone, if I call the city, they're going to send out a police officer.

It's about 15 percent of police calls. Because we have a large number of police officers responding to homelessness, and so just homeless complaints alone are between 70,000 and 90,000 per year in San Francisco, this creates, obviously, a huge problem in terms of the opportunity for officer-involved use of force and officer-involved fatalities.

In San Francisco, almost all of our officer-involved fatalities, along with even shootings, have been a large portion is people with mental illnesses, a large portion is African Americans, and they intersect around housing status. Almost every single one of our officer-involved shootings has been of somebody who's out on the streets.

So it really amplifies these inequities that people face. We also have a lot of situations around illegal searches and seizures. A lot more arrests around drug arrests and possession, and all these other things that happen because there's just this constant interface with police for folks who are out on the streets because they don't have that protection of a door.

They don't have their own home, and so basically everything is all kind of out in the open.

KENDALL: So much of this seems like we see various situations play out where we end up spending money kind of down the road to deal with the aftermath of a bad situation, as opposed to investing money kind of closer to before a bad situation happens. Before someone is experiencing homelessness. Before the police are called. Before addiction happens. Before all of these things that can kind of play out in this path.

I'm curious: what are you at the Coalition on Homelessness advocating for currently that really seeks to address the root causes of homelessness?

JENNIFER: Yeah, and you're absolutely right. It literally costs more to keep people homeless than it would to just put them in housing. Most of those costs are around medical care.

Yeah, it's really important for folks to know. Also, police and other things, sanitation, etc. But the primary is the health care costs. Homeless people present as 25 years older their calendar year. So, me as a 50-year-old woman—I'm not, I'm 57—but let's pretend I'm 50 would present medically as a 75-year-old in terms of increased risk of diabetes rates, heart disease, all the things that go along with that responsiveness.

It really wreaks havoc. So what we're doing at the Coalition on Homelessness, we really follow national best standards in terms of what we advocate for. Every community can follow the same, and many communities across the country are doing this really well and having a lot of success.

But you want to right-size your system. As we talk to unhoused folks, one of the first things they're saying in terms of what you want us to work on is, really, "[It] would have been great if I could have been prevented from being homeless in the first place." A lot of times, it's just a short-term subsidy.

Maybe they're doing pickup labor and broke their arm and couldn't pay rent. Maybe it's a more catastrophic health issue or a longer-term subsidy through a struggle with cancer would have kept them in their housing. Or maybe they're on a fixed income and they have a disability or they're a senior and their rent's rising up above their income and a little subsidy for the rest of their life would have kept them in housing.

But we really need to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. And then if they do become homeless and we don't prevent it, then we have shelter so that they don't end up on the streets. Shelter is not appropriate for everyone, but it's appropriate for some folks, and they get in and then the negative consequences of the streets don't affect them, but we want them to move out of shelter as quickly as possible.

You don't want people stuck in shelter, and then you do that by having housing, and you have housing that's affordable to them, and we don't have to build all that housing. That's not necessary. We should build housing, of course. We should fully utilize all our public housing stock, but we can also acquire buildings.

We can take tourist hotels and convert them into housing. We can also do subsidies in the private market where people can have support services. The person needs the extra support services with those subsidies in the private market. So in San Francisco, for example, we've got some matching money from the state, and we had an initiative that we put on the ballot.

That's called Prop C. And we were able to, in a really short period of time, get about a thousand units. And then we also got almost a thousand, nine hundred ninety four or something, what people usually think about as Section 8s, but they now call them "housing choice vouchers" from the federal government.

We were able to get all, use all of those and get all of those folks in housing in San Francisco at our rental prices. There's so much that can happen, that we can do to address this issue. It is going to save us money and resources. But we have to prioritize investments at the local, state, and federal level.

In San Francisco, our budget to solve homelessness is only five and a half percent of our total city budget. That is not enough. That is not nearly enough given it's a No. 1 issue in San Francisco and in cities across the country.

KENDALL: You sit in the kind of hotbed of this issue in a lot of ways.

I think nationally speaking, San Francisco is one of the cities that is dealing more with this kind of rise in homelessness, though it's always existed, but I think especially being exacerbated by the cost of housing in the area, thanks to the tech boom, the runaway cost of housing has impacted. I mean, folks that are not experiencing homelessness talk about this all the time when they're thinking about what cities to move to.

I wanted to actually bring this up to you because I do think that we see the use of homeless people as a political wedge, not just in San Francisco, but more broadly. One of the things that always strikes me as curious is that even kind of quote-unquote "well-meaning, liberal folks" will turn their backs on homeless people.

There's a name for this. People colloquially call these folks NIMBYs, or Not In My Backyard folks, alluding to the idea that once this issue impacts people, these people, right? The people that are well-meaning liberal folks, in that affordable housing is going up in their neighborhood. They protest. They fight back.

Why do you think this issue turns even the "well-meaning liberal folks" away?

JENNIFER: It's a really good question, and I think it kind of goes back to that intersectionality and the use of people as political scapegoats and kind of really kind of bringing up the fear. For unhoused people, it's so traumatizing to be on the streets, and their worst moments are witnessed by everybody else.

You get in an argument with your partner, everybody's there to listen in, all these private moments are public. I think creating this situation where basically we're creating a permanent underclass in the United States. It is really disheartening because people do feel comfortable in these forums really saying very hateful things about an entire class of people that is completely unwarranted.

KENDALL: Yeah, I mean, I think we talk about this a lot on the podcast whether it's in regards to anti-trans bans that are popping up across the country, education censorship efforts that are popping up in community meetings and school board meetings all across the country. Folks who feel fervently and are fueled by typically fear, which, then kind of after fear becomes hate show up. They show up in numbers and they show their emotion, and sometimes they're the loudest voice in the room.

And I think oftentimes folks who don't feel that way don't show up because they don't feel perhaps as passionate about it. What can you tell folks who are listening today, and they want to do something in their local communities? What can you tell them about a good first step?

JENNIFER: Yeah, the first thing is homelessness is absolutely solvable, and we all got to feel that in our heart. I think this idea that it's unsolvable is working against us, and that's just not true. This is something we created by a host of really bad decisions.

So folks should, first of all, get to know your unhoused neighbors, just as you, hopefully, are getting to know your housed neighbors in the same way.

Introduce yourself. There's a lot of individual support people can give. Be aware of those common tropes. Be active in your local neighborhood groups and when they're coming up and they want to solve homelessness and this whole idea of we need the city to come in and call the police, push back on that and organize against it.

Bring in some friends. Get a more positive direction, because that energy that's pushing for a negative response can be shifted towards a positive response that actually solves it. And people need to be educated that a criminalization approach doesn't work.

Get to know what services are in your area. And, of course, make sure you're putting pressure on all your local, state and federal electeds. It needs to be a top priority for them, and it needs to be a top priority for our state reps. And it needs to be a top priority for the people doing the local government. As we keep people homeless for longer and longer, it's more and more expensive to solve it.

So, we need to do the work to make all these corrections, and once we do, and folks are stable, we really can see an end to homelessness in this country. ■

This interview is available at aclu.org/podcast or wherever podcasts can be found.

PHOTOS BY ALASTAIR BOONE

CELEBRATE 35 YEARS OF STREET SHEET

This year marks the 35th anniversary of Street Sheet, the longest continuously running street newspaper in the United States! In celebration, we are holding a year-long fundraising campaign with a goal of $90,000, enough cover the cost of printing Street Sheet for the next 3 years! Street Sheet has been an integral part of the Coalition on Homelessness's history, and a crucial platform for unhoused authors and artists to share their experiences. Please donate to celebrate its monumental legacy, and help us continue Street Sheet for years to come!

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TO SIGN UP, VISIT OUR OFFICE AT 280 TURK ST FROM 10AM-4PM ON MONDAY-THURSDAY AND 10AM-NOON ON FRIDAY

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